

Private, public sectors team up to solve manufacturing workforce crisis

In contrast to doomsday headlines read each day across the country, American manufacturers are still producing products, and they're finding it increasingly difficult to find workers with the right skills to make them. In fact, recent poll results featured by the Society of Manufacturing Engineers revealed that 27 percent of manufacturing executives cited the lack of employee skills as their leading obstacle to growth, even above the high cost of oil, tax policies and a weak U.S. dollar.

Manufacturing in Demand

"Advanced Manufacturing is the area's second largest industry sector in terms of employment" according to Todd Gustafson, executive director of Michigan Works! Berrien, Cass, Van Buren. "Our labor market projections indicate that by 2012, 23.3 percent of tri-county jobs will be within this industry throughout the next four or five years, second only to jobs in hospitality and tourism."

Michigan Works!, a non-profit workforce development organization, has convened an Advanced Manufacturing Regional Skills Alliance group, comprised of representatives from manufacturing companies and education providers in

order to find solutions to the industry's workforce challenges. They are making efforts to re-brand manufacturing as an attractive career choice for young people and increase the quality and availability of local training opportunities.

According to the Michigan Works! Annual Strategic Workforce Report, tri-county manufacturing jobs are expected to increase only by 0.2% within the next five years, yet skills shortages are an immediate concern for many businesses. "The big problem is that a lot of experienced, skilled employees are reaching the retirement age, stated Jim Spicer, plant manager for Whirlpool, Benton Harbor Division. "Replenishing those skill levels is where we find the greatest need."

The challenge is nation-wide. As baby boomers begin to retire in droves, the attrition rate for manufacturing workers will create much more of a demand than the growth rates imply. A survey conducted by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) in 2005 revealed that 80 percent of companies already report that they face shortages of qualified employees including skilled production workers, scientists and engineers.

Technical advances demanding higher

technical skills also contribute to the shortage. Delta Machining in Niles has consistently updated their technology to stay ahead according to president, Wannis Parris. "With the global competition today, I envision that Delta Machining, Inc. will not look the same in 10 years. Even our most state-of-the-art aspects will need to be overhauled and updated or we will not be here."

Parris reinforces the need for basic academic and technical vocational skills "We must do a better job of recruiting a local qualified workforce who have the necessary math, engineering and mechanical education to learn how to maximize the existing and future technologies."

Manufacturing's Image Problem

In the job market, a demand is usually followed quickly by a supply but outdated ideas about manufacturing are preventing jobseekers from pursuing those careers. At one time, manufacturing work involved dreary factories, assembly lines, and mindless, repetitive work, but rapid advances in technology have created cleaner, safer work environments and responsibilities that are highly sophisticated. "There is a lot more computerization and automatic

controls logic", explains Spicer. "There is less manual labor and more machine attendance. It is certainly cleaner, with big efforts to change the shop environment by employing technologies like dust and smog collectors and using more water-based chemicals." He said the efforts are driven not only by a concern for the work environment, but by environmental concerns and the green movement.

A national campaign led by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), is taking on the task of boosting the industry's image. Their Dream It Do It Campaign currently has nine partner regions enrolled in the effort, Indiana and Southwest Michigan being two of the newest members. The Regional Skills Alliance group is spearheading the local campaign. "We've been hearing the same message from the employers we serve about the shortage of qualified workers", explained Gustafson. "The Dream It Do It Campaign has been successful in other regions throughout the country and we have high hopes for it here, too. It is imperative that we cultivate a skilled workforce for our local employers, but it will require a consistent and collaborative effort.